

“Bears” by Sally Cureton

There have been recent sightings of black bears in our community. They are just starting to become active after the winter and looking for food. Spring berries are not yet out, so they head for our trash bins. Because of this, now seems like a good time to discuss them a bit. These bears don't really hibernate, but enter a state of lethargy, which can vary in length depending on the climatic conditions. Winter is spent in a cave or beneath a large fallen tree and if there is a warm spell, they may wake up and even forage a bit.

They are approximately 5 feet long and vary in weight from 125 to 400 pounds. The one seen on Palmer Road recently was reported to be around 300 pounds. Their shaggy hair varies in color but most are indeed black or a darker shade of brown. Their usual posture is on all fours, and they are excellent tree climbers. Surprisingly agile and careful in their movements, one blow from a powerful front paw is enough to kill an adult deer.

Black bears are highly intelligent and are opportunistic feeders, making use of just about any available food source. They prefer berries, nuts, grass and other plants, but will also eat carrion, small animals, fish and yes, our garbage, dog food or bird food. They usually feed in the cool of the evening or early morning.

They reach breeding maturity at about 4 or 5 years of age and breed every 2 to 3 years. One unique point regarding their reproduction is that there is delayed implantation of the egg. If the female does not have sufficient fat to support a pregnancy by October or so, the egg is sloughed off. Black bear cubs are generally born in January or February and twins are most common. The cubs are weaned between July and September of their first year and stay with the mother through the first full winter. Except for breeding and raising their young, these bears are generally solitary animals. They are considered non-aggressive except when injured, protecting their young, or protecting themselves.

You may find fresh bear tracks even if you don't see the bear itself. But, be careful, the bear may be just ahead. Bear prints resemble small human prints, but they are wider and show claw marks. Along well-worn bear paths, look for 'digs' (patches of dug-up earth) and 'bear trees' whose scratched bark shows where they have either been climbing or looking for insects under the bark of a dead tree. A good place nearby to find such signs is on the Rose River Trail off of Skyline Drive. I once missed seeing a couple of them just above us on the hillside as we were hiking there.

There is one other timely topic I would like to briefly address. That is baby birds and what to do if you find one on the ground. They come in two categories: nestlings and fledglings. The most common one to find on the ground is a fledgling that is still learning to fly but has left the nest. Generally, if they are not injured, they should be left alone. Mom is nearby and will look after them.

They do need protection however from dogs and cats. Domestic cats are not part of the natural ecology and their recreational kills upset the ecosystem. If you have outdoor cats, this is a critical time of year to keep them in.

If the bird has been injured, predators are about or you know the parents have been killed, you will need to rescue them. Temporarily place them in a mid-sized box lined with newspaper. Always make air holes and place one or more perches made of wood inside. Then call the Wildlife Rescue Center in Waynesboro at 540-942-9453. They maintain a list of certified wildlife rehabilitators.